“HONEY, I’M (AT) HOME”: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOUSEHUSBANDS WITH ABSENTEE WIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring the lived experiences and challenges of Filipino househusbands who are engaged in role reversals with their absentee wives. It examined the underlying factors of marital role reversal and wives’ need to work abroad as well as the challenges and its impact on their self-concept. Househusbands’ coping mechanisms, learning and realizations in experiencing role reversals were also presented. Using phenomenological and case study methods, significant findings of this study were drawn from in-depth interviews with seven househusbands and their family members. Given the interplay of various factors, wives’ better career opportunities and family’s financial considerations emerged as the primary factors for the couples’ decision to switch roles. These factors also influenced their wives’ decision to work abroad instead of being employed in their homeland. The pressure of child caring and household tasks, maintenance of smooth marital relationship and struggle for social acceptance with the new family set-up were the major challenges identified in this study. Subsequently, househusbands’ relationships with their wives, children, relatives and friends in the assumption of the breadwinner role revealed both positive and negative changes. While their relationship with other people remained unchanged, the impact of role reversals to househusbands’ self-concept revealed positive views even when they are performing more feminine tasks. Negative feelings of embarrassment and self-pity are also evident at times. With the challenges of role reversals, househusbands generally cope by fulfilling their newly assigned task as primary caregiver and steadfast partner. Social, emotional and financial support coming from their family members, relatives and friends also contributed to their healthy coping. Househusbands’ engagement in role reversals enhanced their marriage, developed their personal values and work-related skills. Implications to the counseling profession and research were also discussed.

Keywords: Househusband, absentee wife, role reversal

1. Introduction

In the confines of family, being one of the most influential social institutions and at the same time the fundamental unit of every society, serves as the primary place where each member learns and plays particular roles mostly determined by one’s gender. Traditionally, the husband is regarded as the leader or head of the family who is expected to be a good provider while the wife’s main
responsibility is to look after the children’s welfare and to manage the domestic affairs (Javier, Costales & Rivas, 2002). Thus, inadequacy in fulfilling these roles or challenging them by assuming a cross-gender activity is often if not viewed negatively by people, they are judged harshly by the society (Wentworth & Chell, 2001).

However, in this contemporary time, families are confronted with changes due to shifting standards that have sweeping effects in many areas of family life especially in what seems to be the ‘traditional’ family structure and labor assignment. Nowadays, women are given if not equal, better opportunities in various human activities including the realm of labor and employment which have been long dominated by their male counterparts. True to these words are the increasing numbers of women participating in labor force in Canada, United States (Catalyst, 2012) and even in the Philippines (Philippine Commission on Women, 2010).

Today, while the field of women’s studies continuously gains popularity and interest as evidenced by the overwhelming number of researches under its name, its counterpart- the small but emerging discipline of men’s studies still struggles to find its rightful place in the research arena. In fact, due to the little attention poured into this discipline, there exist limited empirical studies that examine the condition of men in the face of women empowerment. Likewise, while the majority of existing literatures are foreign in nature, only few studies were conducted in exploring the lives of Filipino househusbands. To date, most studies were concentrated among American, Canadian and European stay-at-home fathers (Barbiarz, 2004; Brescoll & Ulhmann, 2005; Bridges, Etaugh & Farrell, 2002; Callister, 1994; Doucet, 2006; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Helford, Stewart, Gruys & Frank, 2012; Latshaw, 2011; Merla, 2008; Petroski & Edley, 2006; Rochlen, Mckelley & Whittaker, 2010; Rochlen, Suizzo, Mckelley & Scaringi, 2008; Rouleau, 2010; Sinno & Killen, 2009; Wall, Aboim & Marinho, 2007; Wentworth & Chell, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000) and only few among Filipino househusbands (Pingol, 1998; Santos, 2008).

Despite the growing attention placed by research scholars on the experiences and challenges of men that are involved in domestic labor, existing literature still offer very limited facts in the case of the minority of househusbands whose wives left their family for overseas work. This unique situation of househusbands with absentee wives not only creates a myriad of important issues and concerns in the family but also introduces a vast amount of information that significantly differentiate them from men who live with their working wives. It is for this reason that the researchers seek to explore the experiences and challenges of Filipino men whose wives are working overseas and adopt the role of primary caregiver not only to add relevant information to this area of research but also hopes that findings of this study may be found useful to: 1) the Filipino househusbands- given that they are the main participants of the study, they are also the people who will mostly benefit from this research by having the opportunity to share their stories, voice out their sentiments and challenges, defend their side against society’s negative perceptions and judgments and eventually be of great help to other househusbands to learn from their lived experiences; 2) the househusbands’ families- being the immediate group of people that househusbands socialize with, gaining better understanding on their experiences and challenges would make them reflect on the kind of help and support they can extend to them in order to succeed in their new position in the family; 3) the society-acquiring deeper knowledge on the issue of marital role reversal can lead to general public’s increased acceptance and respect on the lives of these men who took up the unconventional but nonetheless viable form of family life; and 4) the counseling profession- findings of this study can contribute in greater understanding of the impact of this new set-up to the dynamics in the family. For family counselors, becoming more knowledgeable on this emerging form of family life can provide new perspectives in handling issues, conflicts or even challenges among family members that go along
with this new arrangement. For school counselors, such information can help them understand their students better especially those with stay-at-home fathers. Furthermore, they can conduct individual and group counseling in order to provide students the avenue to voice out what they think and feel about their family situation and come up with meaningful activities that will help them to better appreciate the uniqueness and benefits of their new family condition.

With its main objective of exploring the lived experiences and challenges of Filipino househusbands with absentee wives, this qualitative study aims to achieve five specific objectives: 1) to identify the underlying factors that led to spouses’ condition of role reversal and wives’ need to work abroad; 2) to describe the challenges experienced by househusbands relating to marital, familial and societal relationships as well as the possible changes in their relationships if they did become househusbands; 3) to find out the impact of role reversal on the overall self-concept of househusbands; 4) to determine the coping mechanisms of househusbands and other people’s help toward a successful role reversal; and, 5) to identify the learning and realizations of househusbands in experiencing role reversal.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This qualitative study utilized both phenomenological and case study methods. The researchers found these two methods most applicable to the inquiry in order to provide a comprehensive analysis on the lived experiences of househusbands.

2.2. Participants

Participants of the study were identified using the exponential non-discriminative snowball technique. This sampling technique involves the referral of participants’ family members and other informants who personally know men who fit to the given qualifications set for the study. Seven (7) participants met the description of a househusband: 1) wife is working overseas for more than 2 years; 2) adopts the role of primary caregiver; and, 3) spends most of the time at home either doing household chores or managing small business or any income generating activities. Men whose wives are working abroad for less than two years were eliminated. In the same way, men who meet the first qualification but are engaged to full-time jobs were also excluded in the study. To add credibility and other relevant information to the study, participants’ wife and children were interviewed.

2.3. Data Collection

In gathering the pertinent data for the study, the researchers considered the following steps: 1) experts review of the interview guide; 2) selection of case and rapport building; 3) transcription of the interview; and 4) verification of data sources.

2.4. Data Analysis

Two processes were involved in analyzing the data for the study. The first process is the individual case analysis. In this process, the researchers have analyzed and presented the participants and family members’ direct answers based on the interview guide following the sequence of the objectives in the study. This allows the researchers to describe in detail the individual cases of participants. The second process is the phenomenological analysis. The following steps utilized in
analyzing the data phenomenologically were adopted from Hycner’s (1985) process. These steps include the following: 1) bracketing and phenomenological reduction; 2) listening to the interview for a sense of the whole; 3) delineating units of general meaning; 4) delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question; 5) defining codes for categories; 6) grouping data into categories; 7) eliminating redundancies; 8) clustering units of relevant meaning; and 9) outlining the framework.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Factors that led to Marital Role Reversal and Wives’ Need to Work Abroad

Out of the responses provided by both participants and family members, this study offers a wide range of factors that contributed to couples’ decision to switch roles. Evidently, two of the most identified factors are linked to wife’s better career opportunities and family’s financial considerations. Primarily, couples took up the unconventional roles of wives as breadwinners and husbands as primary caregivers due to the changing landscape of employment in the Philippines as evident by the growing demand for women’s participation in workforce both locally and internationally. Aside from available work opportunities for women compared to men, couples consider as well the practicality of choosing wives’ higher salary even though this would lead them in challenging couple’s traditional labor assignment in the family. This scenario of couples deciding to switch roles due to wives’ better career opportunities is also evident in past researches (Barbiarz, 2004; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Latshaw, 2011; Petroski & Edley, 2006; Rochlen, et al., 2008; Rochlen, et al., 2010; Russell as cited in Callister, 1994; Santos, 2008; Wall, et al., 2007). Another factor that can be attributed to marital role reversal is the consideration placed by couples with regard to financial condition in the family. This indicates that wife’s new role as breadwinner is economically motivated since husband’s illness stopped him from becoming the provider and that wife’s higher salary would allow her to financially support the family. This finding also supports the study of Santos (2008).

Both participants and family members agreed that wives needed to work overseas due to country’s economic condition and family’s financial difficulties. This suggests that couples consider the practical option of wives working in other countries due to the attractive compensation and benefits they receive. Pursuing their careers overseas would also provide better financial security for them than staying in the Philippines where jobs are considered seasonal. Furthermore, couples believe that by working abroad, wives can help in supporting their family’s financial needs brought about by the growing expenses of children, sustaining husband’s medication and paying financial obligations. Country’s economic condition and family’s financial difficulties are also evident to Asis’ (1995) earlier study among Filipino migrants.

3.2. Challenges of Househusbands

In this study, pressure in childcaring and household tasks emerged as the major challenge identified by both participants and family members. This challenge is connected to househusbands’ responsibilities not only in taking care of the children but also in managing the household. This present finding can be attributed to the unique situation of these househusbands with absentee wives. Compared to other men who live with their working wives, these men are given the responsibility of performing all the tasks single-handedly. Contrary to this finding is the claim of Medina (2001) among Filipino families where overseas employment of the wife leads grandmother,
aunt or female sibling to assume the mother role instead of the husband. This means that while adjusting from their new assigned roles, help from relatives and other people may not also be available for househusbands in this study. While participants share that maintaining smooth marital relationship is another major challenge for them, family members report that social acceptance with their new family set-up remain a struggle for these househusbands. Interestingly, the struggle that these Filipino househusbands face in terms of social legitimacy is also evident to other cultures. Similar to the present finding, the study of Doucet and Merla (2007) among Canadian and Belgian stay-at-home fathers reveals how they are confronted with the social notion that childcaring is solely for women as evident by the negative reactions and remarks coming from relatives, friends and other mothers. Other challenges of househusbands identified in this study include adjusting to new lifestyle, experiencing threats to one’s masculinity and facing inevitable circumstances.

3.3. Changes in their Relationships if did not become Househusbands

First, participants and family members are divided in their responses when asked regarding the changes with househusbands’ marital relationship. Half of the participants believe that working outside would push them to hang out often and spend what they have earned to useless things like vices. This means that househusbands regard their present situation as an excuse to get away from vices since their time is mostly spent with their families. On the other hand, most family members consider the husband’s absence at home as an opportunity for the wife to take care of their children and organize the house. Second, both participants and family members stressed possible negative changes in their children’s relationship such as the lack of bonding time and missing the rare moments of seeing their children grow up right before their very eyes. This indicates that being the sole provider for the family will hinder househusbands from becoming involved in the lives of their children. Third, while majority of participants think that their relationship with relatives would not be different if ever they did not become househusbands, family members on the other hand are more positive when it comes to possible changes. They think that by assuming the breadwinner role, househusbands will be easily accepted by their relatives and will not hear negative comments from them. With these changes, it can be assumed that most relatives still endorse traditional family arrangement where the husband acts as the provider while the wife performs the role of primary caregiver. Fourth, both participants and family members are divided about the possible changes in terms of househusbands’ relationship with friends. According to the participants, changes such as having good times often, becoming boastful and being abused by friends may be evident. This suggests that staying at home cause househusbands to be more focused on the needs of the family rather than their friends. Finally, all participants and family members did not mention any possible change in terms of househusbands’ relationship with other people. This implies that househusbands show little or no concern with people whom they do not have direct contact or emotional attachment with.

3.4. Impact of Role Reversal to Househusbands’ Self-Concept

It is interesting to note how these men remain positive in their views about self-concept even when faced with a general truth that what they are doing are basically for women. Though some househusbands remain positive in their self-image, others cannot help not to be emotionally affected as well especially in dealing with public scrutiny. Even though other people know their existing condition, househusbands still feel ashamed when teased for doing household chores. Feeling of embarrassment is also evident when other guys hear their situation. With these negative feelings, it can be assumed that househusbands also consider their unconventional role negatively
affecting their image as “real men” since what they are doing do not fit them. When it comes to self-confidence, both participants and family members also report househusbands’ positive views and negative feelings. In this study, househusbands stay confident by not considering themselves ‘not a good fit’ for their new position, rather they regard this as an opportunity for them to prove to others that they can also do what women do. However, there are also times when househusbands feel negatively due to the thought that it should be them who are working for the family and not their wives. Self-pity is also evident in them since they are the ones left at home. These two negative feelings may also explain why at times, househusbands realize that their situation make them ‘less of a man’ by not assuming the breadwinner role in the family. This present claim affirms Doucet and Merla’s (2007) previous finding among Canadian and Belgian at-home fathers. In relation of househusbands’ self-esteem, not minding other people help them in maintaining positive views about themselves especially in their ability to love and be loved. This means that they do not let criticisms from other people affect their views in being both husbands and fathers which is also evident in the study of Santos (2008).

3.5. Househusbands’ Coping Mechanisms and Other People’s Help toward Successful Role Reversal

It can be noted that majority of participants and family members emphasize several things that househusbands do which are linked in fulfilling their new assigned role as primary caregiver. Aside from prioritizing children’s welfare and spending quality time with them, househusbands also exert effort in establishing deeper connection with their children by helping them with their problems and understanding them better. They also devote themselves to their assigned role by doing all the responsibilities, thus allowing them to fulfill the position of a mother. This indicates that more than anyone or anything, househusbands regard their children as their first priority as evident by their active involvement in their lives. Interestingly, such finding is a confirmation to one of Tan’s (as cited in Medina, 2001) classifications of Filipino fatherhood which is the generative father who spends much time with children and enjoys being with them such that fatherhood becomes an opportunity for his own growth and fulfillment. Given that their wives are working abroad, househusbands stress the importance of trust, respect, understanding and open communication in strengthening marital relationship which are also evident in the study of Gresham and Smit (2011) among families of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). On the part of the wife, not controlling the husband also contributes to a stronger marital relationship. With these ways, it can be inferred that other than being good fathers, househusbands also exert extra effort in being “good husbands”.

Besides exploring househusbands’ coping mechanisms, this study also identified the people who extend help to them in order to succeed with role reversal. Social support given by children, relatives and friends were emphasized by both participants and family members. Househusbands receive social support through the cooperation and help extended to them in fulfilling their responsibilities related to childcaring and household tasks. While children cooperate in doing household chores, parents and relatives on the other hand give advices and help them in taking care of the children. Friends are also supportive to househusbands by not putting them down. Other than social support, househusbands also get emotional support from their families and relatives. Inspite of long distance, their wives show great deal of concern by checking their condition at home. Aside from being their source of happiness, their children also provide support and encouragement to househusbands. They make them feel as well that they are their fathers no matter what happens. Both families also provide moral support. Financial support is also given by wives, relatives, friends and neighbors to househusbands especially when they do not have work. The kind of support these househusbands receive from family members and friends are also evident to other studies (Barbiarz, 2004, Santos, 2008).
3.6. Learning and Realizations in being a Househusband

Both participants and family members stress that househusbands’ current role in the family allowed them to realize the importance of enhancing their marital relationship and served as an opportunity to develop personal values and work-related skills. Aside from reporting how their love for their wives has increased due to role reversal, househusbands also realized the significance of understanding, support, trust and constant communication in their family set-up. They also shared their eagerness to find whatever job just to help their wives. This suggests that househusbands attribute to their present condition the ability to build a stronger relationship with their wives amidst long distance between them. Furthermore, househusbands regard their new role in the family as another opportunity in developing personal values and work-related skills by realizing the importance of setting aside one’s pride, having great patience and prioritizing God in their current role. These men also underwent significant personal changes as they have learned not only to value the love for family but also on how to become responsible, kind and caring to their children including budgeting. This finding also connects to Doucet and Merla’s (2007) study where stay-at-home fathers also undergone changes by developing emotional literary, management skills and a sense of organization by caring for their children.

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

Given the interplay of various factors, wives’ better career opportunities and family’s financial considerations serve as primary reasons why couples challenge traditional gender roles and influence wives’ decision to work abroad. As wives take the new position of being the breadwinner in the family, husbands are confronted with challenges as they adopt the responsibility of performing feminine tasks such as taking care of the children and managing the domestic affairs. Furthermore, maintenance of smooth marital relationship and struggle for social acceptance with the new family set-up serve as challenges as well. By assuming the breadwinner role, househusbands’ relationships with their wives, children, relatives and friends reveal both positive and negative changes. However, no related literature is available to support or negate present findings. Thus, it is recommended that similar research must be conducted that focuses on these changes in order to verify claims of this study. When it comes to their self-concept, househusbands remain positive even when they are performing more feminine tasks. However, negative feelings of embarrassment and self-pity are evident at times. Given a multiplicity of challenges and dilemmas, househusbands cope with the daily demands by fulfilling their newly assigned task as primary caregiver and steadfast partner. It is the social, emotional and financial support coming from their family members, relatives and friends that also contribute to their healthy coping. While househusbands receive various support from their loved ones and friends, it is recommended that they and their family members seek professional help among family counselors in order to talk about their experiences and challenges, resolve possible conflicts and come up with clear goals on how every member can help and support each other to succeed with their new family arrangement. Aside from them, special attention should be given to their children since absence of a mother figure during their development especially throughout their formal schooling years could potentially create a number of behavioral, emotional and academic problems. Finally, househusbands’ engagement in role reversals allows them to realize the importance of enhancing marital relationship and develop personal values and work-related skills.
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